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ABSTRACT

Noting the pervasiveness of rock music videos beyond cable television, this paper explores the exploitation of women as sexual objects that characterizes many of these videos and the rock music industry itself. The paper first discusses the sociocultural male-female attitudes that underlie the misogyny implicit in the videos. It then illustrates this phenomenon by analyzing the video "Flesh for Fantasy," by punk rock musician Billy Idol, including the lyrics, music track, Billy Idol's character in the video, the film set and supporting cast, and camera work and editing. The paper concludes with a caveat concerning the effects of such images, repeated 24-hours a day, on the formation of sexual attitudes in children and young adults. (HTH)

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SEX, VIOLENCE AND ROCK 'N' ROLL

THE MANIPULATION OF WOMEN IN MUSIC-VIDEOS

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> There are three ways to guarantee MTV rotation--no black faces, pretty women, and athletic guitar solos.
>
> Ed Steinberg, President
> Soft Focus Productions[1]

Now that music-videos have made the jump from cable TV to over-the-air VHF and UHF channels and into nightclubs and video-supermarkets, it is clear that the form has established itself as the fastest growing and, it seems, the most pervasive part of American popular culture. Music-videos are everywhere.[2]

As glorified promotional pieces for the recording industry, music-videos have exploited women as sexual objects to an extent far more graphic and overt that that found in most other forms of above-ground media of popular culture. The rationale for such exploitation is plain and simple.

Michael Shore, author of the just released Rolling Stone Book of Rock Video, sums up the typical response of music biz insiders to the charge of misogyny.

> For one thing, these are promotional videos, and as we all know, sex sells; rock music has always had its inherent misogyny. Furthermore, there is something inherent in the macho mystique of much of the hard rock (or, as it used to be known, "cock rock") that gets onto MTV that seems to mean that whenever a rocker who cherishes his mike stand or guitar as an ornamental phallic extension desires a woman, the vulnerability inherent in that desire results in an instant objectification, resentment, fear, and loathing of the woman desired.[3]

So, instead of subliminal seduction, today we are confronted with supraliminal seduction.

MTV (Warner Amex's 24-hour-a-day Music Television), the fast-track of the music-video world, implicitly justifies sexual exploitation along legalistic lines. According to MTV programming executive John Sykes:

> We have a very open relationship with the record industry, and they know we have certain guidelines and limitations. We won't show anything we consider to be gratuitous sex or violence. But censorship is a gray area--it's art, and the artist's mind can wander in a number of directions. That's the artist's decision. We're only the gallery. And we are talking about rock music here, not Mister Rogers. At any rate, record companies understand that by now, and they never send us anything we have to censor.[4]

Sykes' comments on gratuitous sex and violence help explain, according to Shore, why rock-videos always show "implied sex or violence in the form of meaningful stares and glances and ominous or provocative movements, edited to titillate without showing the actual pay off."[5] The self-censorship mentioned by Sykes is a further indication of MTV's status as leader of the pack.

Shore, noting that censorship has been the mother of music-video innovation in other areas as well, cites music-video auteur Russell Mulcahy, whose credits include lauded videos for Duran Duran, Elton John, Kim Carnes, Bonnie Tyler, Rod Stewart and Billy Joel.

> Before MTV, the BBC or wherever else pop promos were shown would always censor certain things--you couldn't show people smoking or drinking alcohol, whatever. Eventually we figured, if they're gonna keep ruining our narratives with arbitrary cuts, why bother with narrative at all? So we just started making them more abstract.[6]

Shore also refers to "puzzling evidence," a term coined by Devo's Gerald Casale for music-video's clichéd images and their potential significance.

> In the seventies, record producers had a certain sound or texture they got that labels all sought in order to guarantee sales. Now video directors work the same way; they're creative mercenaries hired out by all these bands who need video all of a sudden but never really thought about it before. It's stamp-out time, just like with Tin Pan Alley and disco. The video directors are hired out to apply their aesthetics to the band. . . . Now, some of these videos are, in terms of production value and craft, obviously very good. In terms of content, they're obviously totally vacuous. But they have to be vacuous. Just like Hollywood movies or TV shows, there's a formula, a shell, and it's all-too-rarely ever filled with any guts or meaning or content or insight or information.
>
> However, televised imagery is powerful, and even if it is gratuitous, as in most rock videos, it always means <u>something</u>. At the very least, rock videos reveal more about the bands than the bands themselves ever imagine, just by documenting the kind of imagery they want to associate with themselves. You can notice all these different motifs in these videos, which I put under the bracket of "puzzling evidence." There are the motifs of constantly breaking glass, breaking furniture, the guitars smashing through walls and TV sets, lockets dropping onto art-deco checkerboard floors and smashing in slow motion, shot with strobe decay . . . and it's always followed by <u>the hostile look</u>, usually in slow motion or extreme close-up on the eyes, nose and mouth. It's that tired old visual arrogance completely derived from fashion photography.[7]

To illustrate the style or mode of exploitation characteristic of music-videos, I would like to build on the above ideas by examining the music-video promoting Billy Idol's "Flesh for Fantasy," a track from Idol's latest album, <u>Rebel Yell</u> (Chrysalis Records FV 414501 1983).[8] The first part of the analysis will focus on the video's basic elements: the lyrics, music, protagonist, supporting players, costumes, decor, camera positions and editing. The second part will discuss the implications of these

elements as they coalesce to form a style typifying the treatment of women in the world of music-videos.

Lyrics: The title tells all. The subject of the song, literally and figuratively, is "flesh for fantasy." Articulated in the first-person by Idol, the lyric is an exhortation to conjure up erotic fantasies in order to increase the voltage of a sexual rendezvous, perhaps with a too familiar lover. In the field of psychotherapy, Idol's technique might be categorized as an example of "guided imagery."

"Face to face, and back to back, you see and feel, my sex attack," coos the confident Idol. However, when "flesh" pops up a second time in the chorus, Billy's smoothly intoned delivery gives way to a gutteral primoridal grunt. From tender caresses to macho declarations, it's clear that Idol is a man for all emotive seasons.

Music: The instrumental background for the lyrics consists of a glossy mix of guitars, synthesized keyboards, electric bass and drums. Set at a medium tempo delineated by a restrained yet insistent hi-hat, the mix is richly textured without being overproduced to the point of sounding flabby. The world of fantasy is alluded to by the discrete use of an out-of-time Doppler-like effect. Suggesting a time-warped passage to another perceptual state, the effect functions as an aural correlative to the slowly rippling optical dissolve that was used so fondly by Hollywood directors during the 1930s and 1940s.

Protagonist: Billy Idol, a lean serpentine bleach blonde, epitomizes the kind of cool aloofness associated with the kind of fashion photography mentioned by Casale. Garbed in tightly-fitted black leather, and decked out with chains and a cross falling against his bare chest, Idol is the

epitomy of chic, high fashion punk. Indeed, Idol looks like he just stepped out from the pages of Andy Warhol's Interview magazine.

Shot in medium to close range of the camera, Idol delivers his song in what Herbert Zettl calls the mode of "direct address."[9] Idol, in other words, speaks directly to the camera, which has assumed the viewpoint and position of the viewer. Idol, in effect, is urging all of us in television-land to evoke images of "flesh for fantasy."

To accentuate the sado-masochism of Idol's aura with its menacing yet mesmerizing threat of pleasure with pain, Idol contorts his face into twisted snarls when italicizing such words as "flesh" and "sex attack." Further emphasis derives from Idol's body language. When rounding off a phrase, Idol often assaults us with a sharp, aggressive thrust of his right-hand fist. These karate-like jabs are made even more dynamic because of the heightened sense of velocity achieved through the use of a wide-angle lens.[10] The final result of these combined visual strategies is an unmistakable impression of Idol's capacity for aggressive belligerence.

Supporting Players/Costumes: Guitarist Steve Stevens is featured in several shots where the song's musical texture is dominated by Stevens' multi-noted "breaks." The motif of aggression is evident not only in Stevens' machine-gun-like flurries, but in the physical "attacks" on his guitar as well.

Choreographed erotica is provided by a troup of agile dancers coupled in boy-girl pairs. Costumed in revealing black outfits and provided with suggestive movements, the dancers are the objectification of Idol's "flesh for fantasy."

It should come as no surprise that the females are the objects of the camera's affection. Sometimes in silhouette, sometimes in shadows, and sometimes fully exposed by a penetrating shaft of light, the dancers literally provide the stuff of Idol's "fantasy." Bare arms, firm athletic buttocks and shapely thighs peeking through scallops and scoops cut out from the leotards are the cues for Idol's "sex attack."

Decor: The sets reflect an amalgam of influences ranging from German expressionism to au courant pop-art. One set, a nocturnal urbanscape featuring painted buildings curving in toward the center of the frame and brushed-in windows, is a transposition of the graphic designs created by Robert Herlth and Walter Rohrig for F. W. Murnau's The Last Laugh (1924).

A large pink neon triangle framing a kneeling nude represents the pop-art end of the stylistic spectrum. Inserted into several scenes including those shot in the above-mentioned urbanscape, the radiant triangle, resonating with its electrically-charged gases, represents another variation on the theme of "flesh for fantasy."

Camera Positions/Editing: Camera positions are usually at eye-level to intensify the direct-address mode used by Idol and his supporting players. The camera does dolly-out at times, tracking with Idol as he stalks toward us. And, at several points, the camera assumes a high angle, framing Idol and guitarist Stevens primarily for the purpose of providing visual diversion; Idol's unswerving gaze, though, remains fixed on the lens and, therefore, at us. At the end, a slight upward boom signifies closure.

Though there are only several backdrops used, the intercutting clicks along at what at first seems a feverish pace. Indeed, during the song's 4-minute, 37-second duration, there are 105 separate "shots," mostly close-

ups and medium close-ups. While the majority of transitions between shots consist of straight cuts, there are dissolves that fit those musical moments when the mood is lyrical; a few dissolves are elongated to the point where they become superimpositions. There are several slow motion shots also motivated by the music's lyricism.

In spite of the rapid editing rate, the overall "feel" is anything but frantic. Indeed, reflecting the sensual luxuriance of the lyrics, music and mise en scene, the editing tends toward invisibility--even though jump cuts pop up here and there.

Assuming "Flesh for Fantasy" to be typical of the group of rock-videos capitalizing on the sexual exploitation of women, I would now like to suggest several critical concepts and concerns that help frame various dimensions of the problem.

It should be clear, given the elements outlined above, that the visual structure of "Flesh for Fantasy" is designed so that the viewer identifies with Idol's point of view. In this regard, it is useful to invoke the concept of suture, the process whereby the gap between the spectator and the on-screen event is filled by the spectator who thus becomes the "stand-in" or subject-in-the-text. As suggested by feminist film critic Annette Kuhn, "the process of subjectivity in cinema is seen as both ongoing and dynamic in that the subject [i.e., the spectator] is constantly being "sewn-in" to, or caught up in, the film's enunciation."[11]

It follows, then, that the intensity of this suturing process is increased, especially in rock-videos like "Flesh for Fantasy," because of the imposition of an essentially pervasive subjective camera technique. It

is as if we were "sewn-in" to the world of Idol's fantasy with a double, instead of single, stitch.

Another way of looking at female exploitation in rock-videos is based on the concept of scopophilia, the psychological drive to pleasurable looking. The urge to look, according to Freud, is one of the sexual or libido drives. Kuhn elaborates:

> Active scopophilia demands, in its pleasurable aspect, a distance between subject and object, in that it is in the play of absence and distance that desire is activated. Given that in cinema the object of the spectator's look is indeed both distant and absent, the filmic state must be particularly prone to evoking the pleasurable aspects of looking. Pleasurable looking here takes the form of voyeurism, in which the object of the look is outside of, and distanced from, the subject, and there is apparently no comeback for the spectator in the form either of a returned look or other response, or of punishment for looking. Cinema, according to this argument, involves a kind of "lawless seeing," and this is one of the major sources of its pleasure.[12]

E. Ann Kaplan offers another way of understanding the misogyny of music-videos by pointing to recent interactions between society and popular culture.

> The contemporary film, of course, has gone even further than the noir film in the open representation of female sexuality. The causes for this are well known: the various 1960s movements produced radical cultural changes resulting in a loosening of rigid, puritanical codes, and the women's movement encouraged women to take possession of their own sexuality, gay or straight. The open display of female sexuality has been threatening to patriarchy and has forced a greater degree of directness about the underlying causes for relegating women to absence, silence, and marginality. The mechanisms that worked in earlier decades (i.e., victimizing, fetishizing, self-righteous murdering) to obscure patriarchal fears no longer worked in the post-1960s era: the sexual woman could no longer be designated "evil," since women had won their right to be "good" and sexual, and the need to use the phallus as the prime weapon for dominating women, no matter whom

> they are or whether or not they have done anything wrong, could no longer be hidden.[13]

In other words, men, threatened by "the new woman" spawned by the women's movement, have tended to react to the erosion of patriarchal hegemony with hostility, indeed, even hatred and violence.

Molly Haskell in From Reverence to Rape: The Treatment of Women in the Movies (1973) points out the unprecedented trend toward scenes showing women being raped in films of the early 1970s. It should be noted that this trend, if broadened to include films showing women being maimed and murdered, continues unabated to the present. Indeed, in films like those of the Halloween series, the orgiastic linking of sex and murder carries the trend to its extreme and abhorrent end.

Kaplan concludes that in today's dominant above-ground cinema, patriarchal hostility is now expressed in the idea that all women are yearning for sex all the time.

> The repulsion in this notion (for men) comes from being forced to recognize the vagina, and thus sexual difference. Man's reaction is to want to "give it to her," as painfully as possible and by force, in order first to punish her for this (imagined) desire; second to assert his control over her sexuality; and finally to prove his "manhood" by his ability to dominate with the phallus.[14]

Music-videos such as "Flesh for Fantasy" play on, to one degree or another, the rock idol's sexual dominance and the female's submissive and sado-masochistic willingness to have him "give it to her." In "Flesh for Fantasy," this motif of violence is implicity expressed through Idol's overall aggressive pose, the ominous shots of hands clapping and the close-ups of female buttocks being slapped.

The most disturbing aspect of music-video misogyny is the impact of these images (repeated ad nauseum 24-hours-a-day) on children. Michael Shore comments:

> One has to worry: it's one thing for an adolescent rock consumer to hear these songs; it's another when he sees, several times a day for weeks on end, these songs literally fleshing out male fantasies with sexist imagery. This has led to some parents to rethink their attitudes towards video. Should an eight-year-old child see women hung on meathooks?[15]

I would add that it is a matter of more than passing concern to focus on the impact of such videos on adolescents "using" the media to "learn" the parameters and rituals of male-female relationships.

The consequences of such seductive works as "Flesh for Fantasy" are difficult to chart. However, in closing, let me conclude with a question posed by Edward Donnerstein and Daniel Linz, psychologists at the University of Wisconsin concerned with the influence of sexual violence in the media.

> Researchers have shown that exposure to even a few minutes of sexually violent pornography, such as scenes of rape and other forms of sexual violence against women, can lead to antisocial attitudes and behavior: It can increase the viewer's acceptance of rape myths (for example, that women want to be raped), increase the willingness of a man to say that he would commit a rape, increase aggressive behavior against women in a laboratory setting and decrease one's sensitivity to rape and the plight of the rape victim. If a brief exposure to sexually violent pornography can have these effects, what are the effects of exposure to hours of such material?[16]

Notes

[1] Steinberg, a music-video director who heads Soft Focus Productions, is quoted by Michael Shore in The Rolling Stone Book of Rock Video (New York: Quill, 1984), pp. 104-5.

[2] For background material on the music-video phenomenon, see Film Comment's "Midsection: Rock'n Video," 19 (August 1983), pp. 33-51; Arnold S. Wolfe's "Rock on Cable: On MTV: Music Television, the First Video Music Channel," Popular Music and Society, 9:1 (1983), pp. 41-50; and Shore's Rock Video, the most comprehensive and incisive treatment available. For current coverage, see such trade papers and magazines as Variety, Billboard, Advertising Age and Cash Box.

[3] Shore, Rock Video, p. 107.

[4] Ibid., p. 108.

[5] Ibid.

[6] Ibid.

[7] Ibid., p. 109.

[8] For profiles of Billy Idol, see MTV's Who's Who in Rock Video (New York: Quill, 1984), p. 91, and Parke Puterbaugh's "Billy Idol's Sinister Dreams," Rolling Stone, 29 March 1984, p. 60. Idol, an English-rocker identified with the punk-New Wave phenomenon of the 1970s, migrated to New York in 1981 to put together a new band. Collaborating since 1982 with guitarist/song writer Steve Stevens, Idol hit the record and video charts

with "White Wedding" and "Dancing with Myself." Currently, "Flesh for Fantasy," co-written by Idol and Stevens, is cutting its own mark both as a 45rpm single and as a video. The music-video under consideration here was directed by Howie Deutsch, a noted director of trailers for such feature films as Ghandi, Reds and Flashdance.

[9] Herbert Zettl, Sight, Sound, Motion: Applied Media Aesthetics (Belmont, CA: Wadsworth, 1973), pp. 232-3.

[10] Ibid., p. 212.

[11] For a useful discussion of suture within a feminist framework, see Annette Kuhn, Women's Pictures: Feminism and Cinema (London: Routlege & Kegan Paul, 1982), pp. 53-6.

[12] Kuhn develops this argument under "The Look," in Women's Pictures, pp. 57-65. For a contrasting yet complementary treatment of scopophilia, see E. Ann Kaplan, Women and Film: Both Sides of the Cinema (New York: Methuen, 1983), pp. 14-5.

[13] Kaplan, Women and Film, pp. 6-7.

[14] Ibid.

[15] Shore, Rock Video, p. 107.

[16] Edward Donnerstein and Daniel Linz, "Sexual Violence in the Media: A Warning," Psychology Today (January 1984), pp. 14-5.